

NEWS

City's revitalization vision for river network includes restoring Bridgeport's Bubbly Creek

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By Monica M. Walk

A recent City of Chicago vision plan for Chicago's three rivers includes clean-up and restoration that finally will eliminate Bubbly Creek's stockyard stench, opening the waterway for recreation and better neighborhood quality of life.

Bubbly Creek—at the south fork of the Chicago River's south branch —creates a boundary between Chicago's Bridgeport and McKinley Park neighborhoods.

"It's 2016 vs. Upton Sinclair's book," said Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC) program director Josh Ellis, referring to *The Jungle*, Sinclair's 1906 exposé of the meatpacking industry. Bubbly Creek earned its name from the gases bubbling up from decomposing entrails and blood dumped in the river by meat processors at the nearby Union Stockyards.

"Bubbly Creek is a very interesting little body of water," Ellis said. "Its biggest issue is ecology. Water in the creek doesn't flow; the river current is not fast moving. The still water means odors and litter don't move. The sediment on the bottom has the past contamination."

Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced officials will address water quality in a multi-phase vision plan, Our Great Rivers. The plan covers improvements for all three rivers—Calumet, Chicago, and Des Plaines—that flow through Chicago and includes a series of goals with recommended actions to occur by 2020, 2030, and 2040.

"From opening new boat houses to reinventing the Riverwalk, we've made significant investments in the Chicago River to make it the city's next recreational frontier, and we will continue our efforts to ensure that residents across the city have access to recreational opportunities on all three of the city's rivers," said Emanuel when announcing the vision plan. "Our Great Rivers identifies concrete ways to continue to invest in our riverfront in ways that strengthen and connect neighborhoods and improve the quality of life of all Chicagoans."

Resident input for vision

Our Great Rivers' large scale resulted from dozens of organizations coming together to create and support the plan. Core partners are the non-profit MPC led by Ellis in coordination with Friends of the Chicago River, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago. Other groups are involved in financial and program support.

"We undertook more than 120 stakeholder meetings and talked to 6,000 people to learn what they want," said Ellis of the vision planning process. "We were able to boil it down to three concepts for the essence of what people wanted."

The three overarching concepts are Inviting, Productive, Living. Each includes goals, with timing based on feasibility and priority. Five key desired changes stakeholders consistently cited: better



A pedestrian bridge will connect the Eleanor Street Boathouse area with Canal Origins Park at Ashland Avenue.

access; more recreational opportunities; improved aesthetics, water quality, and habitat; more business and tourism along the rivers; and more job opportunities.

"We learned that if you know your corner of the river, folks don't know what's up- and downstream," Ellis said. "There are a 150-plus miles of riverfront in Chicago. It is an untapped resource for economics, recreation, and ecological restoration and connects far more neighborhoods than the lakefront does."

The plan specifies improvements to Bubbly Creek, including a pedestrian footbridge to connect both transit and riverfront pathways.

Making it your riverfront

Neighborhood leadership and support will be key. Ellis said the MPC is creating tool kits to help neighborhood organizations and volunteers create programs, including instructions for getting permits for fishing derbies and other events and how to apply for grant funding for programs such as river clean-up.

"While the City and other government agencies lead on some of the recommended actions, we need residents and local stakeholders across the city to play a lead role in creating a future for our rivers that we can all be proud of," Ellis said.

He encourages neighborhood residents to connect with the South Branch Advisory Council, an allvolunteer watchdog group focused on local waterways. It meets the second Monday evening of the month at the Duck Inn, 2701 S. Eleanor St.

"We want people of all levels of dedication," said South Branch PAC president James Burns, of the group currently focusing on programming for the new Park 571 boathouse, slated to open in 2017.

"The more people, the better community representation and the more utilized the boathouse will be. We want it filled with programs: inside, on the water, around the boathouse with fitness equipment outside. This goes hand in hand with Bubbly Creek—it is the ground floor to effect great change."

"When the plan is seen through, there is going to be tremendous change for the community," Burns said of Our Great Rivers. "This is a piece of the solution to reverse the notion that the rivers are only industrial arteries. The community is beginning to understand the great resource in its yard. We can make it great for the city as a whole, and get people on the water."

Burns believes the MPC and its partners have defined an accurate vision. "They did a phenomenal job of hearing what the community had to say," he said.

He invites interested community members to join the South Branch PAC Facebook page (www.facebook.com/SouthBranch-PAC/); email him at southbranchpac@gmail.com; call him at (312) 479-2636; and attend the monthly meeting. MPC, the city, and partners will keep working together to move the plan forward and find the best ways to coordinate the host of people and groups involved, marshal resources, and ensure ongoing public participation.

Sweeter smelling days

Eliminating Bubbly Creek's infamous odor will require a combination of remediation and pollution reduction.

Ellis noted the creek's sole source of new water comes from sewer overflow consisting mainly of rain run-off from the street (which can include litter, oil, and other pollutants) along with some sewage. "That takes awhile to move out of the area; we need to reduce it," Ellis said.

According to Ellis, the Army Corps of Engineers has a framework in place to cap the creek bed to contain old pollutants and to install manmade wetlands for habitat that will provide natural water cleaning. The plan will move forward after the Army Corps completes a conversation with a private company about potentially funding the cleanup.

Even without the cleanup, the neighborhood already has new townhouse development near the shoreline, a new Chicago Maritime Museum in Bridgeport, the Chicago Park District's Eleanor Street Boathouse under construction in Park 571, and the active Bridgeport Art Center.

"They are still building on the Bridgeport side," Ellis said. "Clearly, people want to be on the water."

Our Great Rivers will lead to a much more inviting Bubbly Creek, Ellis said.

"It will have better odor and water quality, less detritus, and will be more comfortable," he said. "It will be realistic to walk down to read a book and eat a sandwich. I kayaked there this summer and saw egrets and herons and a bunch of turtles. There are no barges or boat traffic; it is a more intimate river experience."

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